DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 684 FL 024 736

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TITLE Cultural and Pragmatic Miscues: A Case Study of International Teaching Assistant and Academic Faculty Miscommunication.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 35p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; Communication Problems; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Traits; *Foreign Students; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; Language Proficiency; *Language Role; Mathematics Education; Pragmatics; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Assistants
IDENTIFIERS Chinese People

ABSTRACT

A study explored communication patterns between Chinese international teaching assistants (ITAs) and faculty in a university mathematics department. Nine experienced faculty, selected because they had expressed opinions about ITAs' needs, and seven ITAs participated. The ITAs had all met the mathematics department's language proficiency test requirements, and had been through an intensive English training program. Data were gathered through unstructured or semi-structured interviews with faculty and ITAs, student journals, classroom observation of ITA and faculty teaching, and written evaluations of ITA teaching by a mathematics faculty supervisor. Results indicate that while faculty held ITAs' mathematics proficiency in high regard, they attributed negative causes to their behavior outside the realm of mathematics. ITAs' polite deference and concern for maintaining face for unequal- status interactions was manifested as silence and avoidance in formal contacts with faculty, within and outside the classroom. Faculty interpreted this behavior as lack of motivation, isolationism, and unwillingness to cooperate in ITA instructional assignments or in improving English skills. The students attributed their own behavior to stressful situational pressures and to the mixed messages they received from faculty about the amount of time they should devote to English. Implications for ITA training are discussed. Contains 40 references. (Author/MSE)

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ED 411 684

Cultural and Pragmatic Miscues: A Case Study of International Teaching Assistant and Academic Faculty Miscommunication.

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Running Title: ITA/Faculty Miscommunication.

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My thanks to Bob Burroughs, Penny Freppon, and Holli Schauber for their valuable assistance in the preparation of this manuscript, and to Barbara Hoekje for her insightful comments and suggestions on the issues discussed.

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the communication patterns between Chinese international teaching assistants (ITAs) and academic faculty in a Mathematics Department. The faculty highly esteemed the ITAs as excellent mathematicians, but attributed negative causes to their behavior outside the realm of mathematics. The ITAs' polite deference and concern for maintaining appropriate face for unequal status interactions manifested itself as silence and avoidance in formal contacts with faculty, both in and out of the classroom. Faculty interpreted this behavior as lack of motivation, isolationism and unwillingness to cooperate in ITA instructional assignments, or in improving their English. The students attributed their own behavior to stressful situational pressures and to the mixed messages they received from the faculty about the amount of time they should devote to English. Results are interpreted as supporting Gumperz' (1982, 1992) theory of conversational inference, and of attribution theoretical approaches (Jones et al, 1972). Implications for ITA training programs are discussed.

The internationalization of universities in the U.S.A has become a reality through the presence in large numbers of foreign students on our campuses. Many of these graduate students finance their education through teaching assistantships awarded by the university. In return for instructional services in undergraduate education, they receive a tuition scholarship and a stipend (Byrd, 1991). By far the largest numbers of international students are to be found in graduate programs in the natural sciences and engineering. The National Science Foundation reports that 40% of recipients of science and engineering doctoral degrees in 1995 were non-U.S. citizens, almost 75% of whom came from Asian countries (Hill, 1996). As faculty in these disciplines interact with international teaching assistants (ITAs) from many cultures, the possibilities for miscommunication increase. This paper addresses this issue through an analysis of miscues that contributed to negative perceptions by faculty of the ITAs in a mathematics department. It is argued that culturally determined communication patterns that were not shared by the

interlocutors were interpreted by the higher status faculty as evidence of the ITAs' lack of motivation to improve English or successfully fulfill their TA assignments.

A considerable body of research mainly located in the disciplines of Teaching English as a Second Language and Applied Linguistics, has focused on international students as teaching assistants (Briggs et al. 1997). However, ITAs and their professors view their primary goal as the pursuit of a graduate degree. Applied linguists and English as a Second Language faculty who prepare ITAs for their role as teaching assistants stand outside the disciplines of the ITAs they train. Thus, they are only peripherally aware of the academic life of the ITAs as graduate students within their own discipline. Research into the communication patterns within discipline specific contexts has focused on typical interactions in several professions. In education, research has been conducted on gatekeeping encounters in which miscommunication occurs when minority group members do not conform to pragmatic and linguistic (pragmalinguistic) expectations as defined by majority group norms (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, 1993; Erickson & Schultz, 1982). Studies have also investigation communication in classroom and office hour interactions that reveal communication miscues (Shaw & Bailey, 1990; Tyler, 1995; Tyler & Davies, 1990). Such studies have contributed important information to our understanding of the ways in which culturally influenced discourse strategies may positively or negatively affect communication. This paper extends that body of work with an analysis of the miscommunication between international teaching assistants and the professors in their own department. Such information can usefully inform courses designed to train ITAs, since the culture of the students' department will almost certainly influence the attitudes and motivation brought to ITA training programs.

The present study originated after the Mathematics Department approached the ESL Program to request an intensive English course for its Chinese ITAs because the department was unhappy with their oral English proficiency. In the event, two intensive courses were offered during successive summer courses, both of which were rated as successful by the students. However, interactions with the faculty and students during both programs hinted that unknown

sources of dissatisfaction seemed to be limiting the mathematics faculty's optimism about the ITAs' potential, and their ultimate motivation to work on their English. In order to prepare for future collaborative programs, the data for this study were gathered as part of an exploratory case study of the context of communication between the faculty and ITAs within the department. In studying this "bounded system" (Stake, 1988), it was hoped that knowledge of crucial aspects of the environment within which the mathematics faculty and students interacted and worked would inform the development of future intensive English and ITA training programs. Such information would be invaluable in understanding the sociopolitical context influencing faculty expectations and the perceptions and behaviors that the students would bring to such programs. The research questions were broadly formulated to explore 1) views held by the faculty about the ITAs' roles, needs, and behavior as graduate students and ITAs, 2) views held by the students about their own roles, needs and behavior as graduate students and ITAs, and 3) evidence of congruence between the perceptions of the faculty and the students.

The approach to these questions was influenced by two separate but related theories: Gumperz' (1982; 1992) sociolinguistic theory of conversational inference, and the social psychology approach of Attribution Theory (Jones et al., 1972).

According to Gumperz, meaning is constructed during the course of an interaction as listeners interpret the pragmalinguistic aspects of behavior, or contextualization cues, that enable listeners to infer speakers' intentions. Thus "meaning in any face-to-face interaction is always negotiable; it is discovering the grounds for negotiation that requires the participants' skills" (Gumperz, 1982, p.14). In intercultural communication situations, inferences about speaker intent will be affected by the participants' culturally specific use of contextualization cues and background knowledge. The less these are shared in a situated encounter, the higher the possibility for miscommunication.

Once miscommunication has occurred because interlocutors do not have a common core of background knowledge, linguistic repertoire, or pragmatic skills, listeners will make sense of what they hear through the process of making attributions. Attribution theory attempts to

provide "an answer to the question: what caused the observed behavior and its consequences?" (Jones et al., 1972, p. ix). Thus, listeners attempt to seek causes for behavior even though they may have incomplete or faulty knowledge, as in intercultural communications. Kelley (1972) suggests that we make attributions quickly and economically as intuitive scientists based on our prior experience and preconceptions about similar data. Jones and Nisbett (1972) point out a discrepancy in the attribution processes of actors (those who perform) and observers (those who witness their performance): Actors tend to attribute their own behavior to situational factors, whereas observers tend to attribute the same behavior to personal characteristics. Each possesses different information, and certain aspects of behavior may have different salience to actors and observers, thus biasing their attributional processes. Kanouse and Hanson (1972) suggest that we are predisposed to find negative information more salient, and that as a result many of our attributions are also negative. Nisbett and Ross (1980) extend this position to argue that the attributions made by most people are fundamentally wrong, based as they are on error, bias and faulty reasoning. The implications for social relationships in general and intercultural communication in particular are obvious.

Review of Relevant Literature

One of the major variables affecting intercultural communication is the distinction between collectivist and individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1988). Triandis argues that collectivist cultures embrace a strong ingroup orientation which fosters interdependence. Communication patterns vary depending on ingroup versus outgroup identity. Hu and Grove (1991) point out that the collective orientation of China's values has been developed over some five thousand years of proud civilization. Today, the groups with which Chinese identify most closely are the family, school, work unit, and local community. University students are tightly knit into class groups of students studying the same major. The traditional role of the teacher goes far beyond the American concept to include concern for personal aspects of the students' lives. As the dispenser of knowledge, the teacher controls the classroom and does not expect student participation or interaction. Triandis' and Hu and Grove's analysis of Chinese values

and cultures suggests that Chinese students in the U.S.A. may bring attitudes and beliefs about relationships and educational norms with them that will conflict with the American system.

In contrast, Garrot (1995) challenged the assumption that Asian students exhibit a collective orientation. She found that university students in China revealed both collectivism and individualism when information such as age, gender and major were taken into account. Garrot concludes that culture-level analyses may not reveal the changes occurring within a society, particularly among the young, and cautions those who teach Chinese students against broad generalizations.

However, Pratt (1991) supports the interpretation of China as a collective culture based on his experience of teaching in China. The Chinese self, as centered in relationships with others, responds very differently to American educational approaches that emphasize the development of students' individuality of expression, and the teacher as facilitator rather than dispenser of knowledge. These differences, Pratt claims, account for Chinese students' silence and reluctance to express opinions in class discussions.

Interactions in academia are characterized by a status differential between teacher and student, with higher status accorded to the teacher. Status is maintained by politeness strategies that maintain positive and negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p.13). Positive face represents a universal wish to be liked, or approved of. Negative face represents the desire to "be unimpeded in one's actions," or the right not to be imposed upon. Scollon and Scollon (1983) interpret such politeness strategies from an interethnic perspective. They see positive face as solidarity strategies, which are based on equal status, and negative face as deference strategies, based on greater distance in status. Kim et al. (1996) found that individuals who valued interdependence used more negative face conversational strategies than did those who perceived themselves as independent. Thus it seems that notions of appropriate use of politeness strategies are quite different among various cultures and language groups, and may affect communication in academic interaction.

One such politeness strategy is the use of silence. Scollon (1985) described the negative attributions made by westerners of the polite reserve of Athabaskans, which manifests itself as silent pauses between conversational turns. To westerners, the contextualization cue of silence is perceived as suspicious and disruptive of smooth conversational flow. Studies of vocal listening behavior among different language groups have shown very different timing and frequency distributions for the utterance of supportive listener vocalizations vis-à-vis silence. Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, and Tao (1996) discovered differences in type and placement of reactive backchannels across languages. Mandarin employs very few backchannels, and these only at turn transitions. Clancy et al. suggest that differences such as these are the kinds of contextualization cues that would be noted as disruptive in intercultural communication. They suggest that English speakers might well find the reserved Mandarin style "somewhat unnerving, leaving them wondering what the listener is thinking" (p.383).

According to Shaw and Bailey (1990), the deferential silence of non-native speakers of English in the classroom can have a damaging effect on their access to information. Their study of engineering classes demonstrated that the informal classroom culture in North America develops as a result of the dynamic negotiation between the professor and students during the first weeks of class. Thus, each classroom developed a specific culture depending on the outcomes of the professor-student negotiations.

International students may be unable or unwilling to participate in such negotiating processes because of linguistic limitations, or because they are bound by their own more formal, teacher-centered schema of classroom behavior. Liberman (1994) found that Asian students at North American universities liked the flexibility and variety of courses, the easy relationships between professors and students, the open exchanges of opinions in the classroom, and the emphasis on critical analysis. Yet, they had found it difficult to adjust to these aspects of academia, and some were troubled by what they interpreted as a lack of respect for the professor.

Gao and Gudykunst (1990) and Gudykunst and Kim (1992) propose that cultural adaptation occurs as the uncertainty that is present in strange situations is reduced, with a

concomitant reduction of the anxiety produced by the unfamiliar setting. Studies of the communication styles and preferences of international students in academic contexts illustrate the difficulty in achieving such reduction. The studies have focused on the use of linguapragmatic contextualization cues which do not accord with the expectations of American audiences, causing irritation or miscommunication.

Liu (1995), reported that Chinese students had great difficulty in automatically responding in the expected way to compliments, even though they knew the correct American English response. Liu attributes this to the fact that "deep-structure sociocultural transfer" (p. 263), influenced by long established first language contextualization cues, can only be replaced by immersion in the host culture and language.

Similarly, Hinkel (1996) found that non-native speakers were aware of the norms of polite and appropriate behavior in the U.S, but were also critical of them when compared to those of their own cultures, and often chose not to follow the American norms. Hinkel speculates that her subjects may not have given high priority to learning appropriate politeness strategies because they were narrowly focused on obtaining their academic degrees: "while most subjects displayed an overt self-reported willingness to conform to L2 pragmalinguistic norms, their self-reported behaviors largely did not support this inclination" p. 67).

In the tradition of gatekeeping research (Erickson & Schultz, 1982), Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990; 1993) analyzed conversations between native and non-native speakers of English in advising sessions with their professors. The non-native speakers were initially unable to make suggestions about the courses they wished to take, and used unacceptable reasons for rejecting advisor suggestions, such as lack of interest or fear that a course would be too difficult. Their defensive strategy required them to object to suggestions made by the advisor. In choosing such a strategy, the non-native speakers used aggravators and violated the maxim to "make your contribution congruent with your status" (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993, p. 281). Nevertheless, over the period of a semester, the non-native speakers were able to learn how to make acceptable suggestions. They did not succeed in eliminating unacceptable aggravators

completely, indicating that pragmalinguistic competence needs time to develop. It is also interesting that the non-native speakers reported that they learned how to act appropriately in advising sessions by asking other non-native speakers rather than native speakers.

Tyler (1995) and Tyler and Davies (1990) analyzed the discourse of Korean teaching assistants to identify the sources of frustration and unhappiness in the outcomes perceived by both participants. They concluded that miscommunication occurred because of the Korean TA's culturally determined need to present himself as modest, and to preserve an American student's face. These strategies resulted in discourse that the American undergraduates perceived as too tentative and vague and thus lacking authority. As a result both participant interpreted the other's behavior as uncooperative.

Although such studies indicate that miscommunication occurs if linguistic minority groups do not adopt the pragmalinguistic norms required by the majority group, Blum-Kulka (1991) believes that even advanced learners may resist adopting the native speakers' pragmatic style in order to maintain their own cultural identity against attack by the target language culture. Additional pressures on pragmatic acculturation were revealed by Jin and Cortazzi (1993), who presented evidence that it was extremely difficult for Chinese students in English speaking universities to ignore the lifetime inculturation of a collective orientation. They could not risk alienation from their ingroup by adopting the norms of the host culture, which were unacceptable to the group.

Zimmerman (1995) observed that frequency of contact and interaction with American students was the main determiner of acculturation for foreign students. Unfortunately, the international students in her study also preferred to rely on informal peer grapevine systems for essential information rather than approaching knowledgeable counselors or other university personnel.

The studies described above suggest that in communication contexts in which the norms of behavior are defined by the majority language group, the onus is on the minority language group to modify its pragmalinguistic behavior to conform to majority language behavior.

Furthermore, perceptions of successful intercultural communication in situations of social inequality may depend on the ability of the lower status group to conform to the expectations of the higher status group. Such is the case in higher education for non-native English speaking ITAs who must interact with faculty. But the ITAs' dual roles as student and teaching assistant also demands that even when they are the higher status participant in interactions with undergraduates, the ITAs are expected to demonstrate the appropriate pragmalinguistic norms of the American classroom. The difficulties for ITAs stem from differences in their cultural and individual level indicators of collectivism or individualism. This orientation may influence their preferred communicative style, resulting in inappropriate politeness strategies, such as silence avoidance, or tentativeness. Lack of opportunity to interact socially with Americans may negatively affect access to the appropriate pragmalinguistic norms which provide the means to reduce uncertainty and anxiety in interactions.

Although this case study of the communication patterns between faculty and ITAs in one university department cannot be generalized, it contributes to our understanding of intercultural communication behavior within an academic context. It also adds essential information to the existing literature on international teaching assistant training, by demonstrating that the communication patterns within the students' home departments are powerful forces in determining the ways in which ITAs make sense of their multiple roles in the academy.

Method

Setting and Participants

Setting

The study was conducted at a large midwestern university. Typical of many universities, the graduate programs in mathematics, the natural sciences and engineering were heavily dependent on foreign students. In these disciplines, foreign students comprised between 50 and 80% of the graduate student population. Approximately 95% of the graduate students at the university received financial support in the form of tuition scholarships or graduate

assistantships. The majority of the foreign students came from The People's Republic of China, with India as the second highest country of origin.

Foreign students whose first language was not English were required to present a TOEFL score of 520 for admission, but most graduate programs required higher scores. In the early nineties, the graduate departments had raised their TOEFL score requirements to around 580 in an attempt to admit students who would be able to pass the university's oral proficiency test. Thus, the average TOEFL score on admission for graduate students from China was 600; for those from India it was 630. All graduate assistants were also required by state law to pass an oral proficiency test to qualify for instructional duties. About 75% of Chinese students failed the oral proficiency interview test. The dilemma was that newly admitted graduate assistants who failed the test were limited to grading duties, leaving the departments scrambling to staff multiple sections of service courses at the last minute. The university had an ESL Program which offered 3-credit courses during the semester. Because the Mathematics Department felt that their students needed a more intensive English experience, the ESL program was asked to develop a summer intensive English course to meet the students' language needs.

Participants

Faculty

From the 45 faculty members in the Mathematics Department, a representative sample was selected using the "network selection" method (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p.79). Beginning with the

faculty member who had initiated contact with the ESL program, the names of faculty who had expressed opinions in meetings or conversations about the needs of the ITAs were solicited. As names were added, each faculty member suggested other names until a total of nine faculty members had been nominated. When it appeared that no new names would be nominated to the list, five more randomly selected faculty members were contacted and asked to participate. All responded that they had never been involved with the ITAs and had no opinions to offer. Then they suggested Dr. X, in each case naming someone who had already been suggested.

Interestingly, the nominated group consisted mainly of senior faculty who were administrators. They were the current and past department heads, the current and incoming graduate program directors, the instructor of the Proseminar in Teaching, the director of undergraduate education responsible for assigning TA duties, the professor responsible for supervising and evaluating TAs in the classroom, and two member of the graduate student admissions' committee. Eight were males, and one was female. Seven men and one woman were professors, and one man was an associate professor. Two men were non native speakers of English. All participants met Spradley's criteria as good informants (perhaps because they were faculty with administrative responsibilities) because of their "thorough enculturation" in the department and "current involvement" with the issues. They had all participated for many years in the critical events and decision making within the department (Spradley, 1979, pp. 47-49).

Students

Participants were selected from the students who had taken the intensive English Programs. Several students had graduated or had transferred to other majors, so the original number of 23 had been reduced to a total of 12. Seven students agreed to participate. All were Chinese (there was only one non-Chinese foreign student in the department at this time, plus five native speakers of English). There were two females and five males. Their ages ranged from 25 to 33, and they had all been in the U.S.A. for at least one year, with the average length of time being 17 months. All had met the Department's TOEFL requirement of 580. At the end of the Intensive English Program they all took the SPEAK test (the released form of the Test of Spoken English) and their scores ranged from 190 to 220. The University required a minimum score of 230 as demonstration of adequate oral English proficiency, but students who participated in the Intensive Program were deemed proficient if they scored 220 because they had received training in classroom presentation and communication skills. Two students scored 220 at the end of the program, and were each given a section of an introductory calculus course to teach. Other students were assigned to grading duties.

Procedures

The data were triangulated through several sources. Data came from the interviews with faculty and ITAs, journals written by the students, observations of the ITAs who were teaching their own classes, written evaluations of their teaching by a mathematics faculty supervisor, and observations of faculty and ITAs teaching their own classes. Interviews with the faculty took place in their offices. They were not audio taped because the faculty had earlier expressed reservations about a taped interview. I took notes in shorthand and transcribed them immediately.

The faculty interviews were semi-structured, and all began with the same open-ended question: "I'd like to know your views on the needs of the international teaching assistants, and how you think the ESL Program can contribute." The second part of the question was more fully probed by a questionnaire designed to elicit opinions about the locus of responsibility (ESL or Mathematics Department) for training the ITAs, and is reported elsewhere (Author, 1996).

Each interview lasted between forty five minutes and an hour. Without exception, they all became mutual interviews because the faculty took the opportunity to ask me questions about a range of ITA issues such as standardized language testing, how to give feedback on presentations by non-native speakers, what happens in ESL classes, how to predict which students will pass an oral proficiency test, etc. I responded as fully and as briefly as I could because I felt that their questions revealed a great deal about their concerns about the issues we were discussing. Similarly, their reactions to my responses were also very informative.

Interviews with students were conducted in a quiet, neutral place, usually an empty classroom. The ITAs were interviewed either by myself or a colleague who had taught on the intensive English program and was well-known to the students. The students consented to be audio taped because they had become comfortable with the tape recorder during the intensive English programs.

The interviews were kept as unstructured as possible, and guided mainly by responses such as "could you tell me what you mean by that?" or "would you say more about that?" We

wanted the students to talk about their communication experiences with their mathematics professors, with undergraduate students as TAs, and with Americans in general. Specific questions about these areas were asked if the students did not volunteer information. Finally, we asked the students questions about their performance on the SPEAK test, which all had taken for the first time in their intensive English Program. Each interview lasted an hour, and the two interviewers transcribed the tapes immediately, checking each other's transcripts.

During the data collection period, I wrote reflective memos and constantly compared the data from each interview and other sources to check for missing or disconfirming data in order to follow up on the information in further interviews.

Analysis

Through the analytic induction approach (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) categories were allowed to emerge from the data. The transcripts were repeatedly read as categories were hypothesized, and constantly refined and modified by rereading the transcripts and checking against other data sources. Constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of categories enabled identification of relevant applications of the category in multiple situations so that the emerging hypotheses could be followed up in subsequent interviews. For example, early interviews with the faculty indicated that they perceived the Chinese students as a closed social group. To probe the students' perspective about such a view, they were interviewed about the extent and the nature of their interactions with other Chinese students, and asked to give their views on interpretations of China as representing a collectivist culture (Triandis, 1988). Throughout the analysis, interpretive memos and data organization using the matrix construction approach of Miles & Huberman (1984) helped make sense of the information.

A colleague in my department, but outside the ESL faculty consulted on this project. She reviewed the method and data analysis for soundness. Then a random selection of one-third of all the data were read by this colleague. She reviewed codes and categories and compared and contrasted her interpretations with the findings of this paper. There were no discrepancies that warranted further study.

Results

The analysis indicated that culturally determined contextualization cues interpreted by the faculty and students precipitated a cause-effect sequence of behaviors in which attributions made on faulty or ethnocentric bases contributed to miscommunication and negative perceptions. The faculty believed that the behavior of the Chinese ITAs "caused problems" but that the ITAs were unwilling to "cooperate" in solving these problems, i.e. in improving their English, becoming more acculturated, and thus better ITAs. The Chinese ITAs acknowledged and desired help in these areas, but their culturally determined politeness strategies of deference caused them to stay silent and avoid discussing their difficulties with the faculty. This behavior meant that they relied much more on their compatriots for assistance and support, thus exacerbating the faculty perception that they were insular and uncooperative. However, the ITAs also felt frustrated by what they perceived as mixed messages from the faculty about the amount of time they should give to English compared to mathematics studies.

The perceptions and attributions of the faculty were also strongly influenced by their own orientation to the role of the ITAs. According to the faculty informants, the majority of the faculty were primarily interested in mathematics research, whereas a few were primarily educators who were interested in the quality of instruction delivered to undergraduates. Of the nine faculty interviewed for this study, five identified their research area as mathematics. Three declared their research agenda to be mathematics education. Three of the five mathematics researchers admitted that administrative positions within the department had required them to pay more attention to issues of mathematics education, particularly the quality of the instruction delivered to undergraduates. Not until they took on administrative roles did they become acquainted with complaints from undergraduates and parents about poor teaching, complaints which frequently focused on the ITAs. The remaining two faculty in this group stated that their interest in and interactions with the ITAs was solely related to the ITAs' role as graduate students in mathematics.

The results will focus on five perspectives: 1) the historical genesis of the problem, 2) the mathematics student role, 3) the ITA role, 4) motivation to improve language ability, and 4) motivation to acculturate. In each case, the faculty perspectives will be compared and contrasted with the student perspectives to highlight the miscommunication and faulty attributions at work.

Historical Genesis of the Problem

Faculty Perspectives

In the 1970s the department experienced a severe drop in the number of U.S. students entering the graduate program in mathematics. At the same time, the People's Republic of China began to open its doors and the first trickle of Chinese scholars came to the department to do post-graduate research. Once their excellence as mathematics students was realized, the trickle became a stream and more and more Chinese students were actively recruited for the master's and doctoral programs. All faculty referred to the fact that in the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a more diverse graduate student body and so there were no problems with language or cultural integration.

In the late 1980s the picture began to change. Because the Chinese were "the best of the lot as students," many more were admitted from the very large pool of applicants from China (estimated at between 200 and 400 per year). However, the increasing reliance on Chinese students created an insular student community. TOEFL scores of applicants rose in response to the competition, but oral proficiency skills on arrival were usually too weak for the students to pass the university oral proficiency test. At the same time the job market declined. Discussions in the department about the role of foreign students were described as " a big fight" or "a bitter debate." The following is a typical description of the issue: "Why are we bringing these students here when there are no jobs? We don't have many math. majors, so why are we educating these foreigners for free?" Likewise: "I don't believe they should be given a free ride at the tax payers' expense. I don't believe we should have to pay money just to pull them through." On the other side of the issue was the view represented by statements such as:

one third of our faculty are foreign born, and when we have discussions

about language proficiency, they see it as a direct attack on them. They were glad to come here for the opportunities and don't want to take the opportunity away from any one else.

Student Perspectives

When asked why they wanted to study in the U.S.A., the students referred to the opportunity afforded them to realize their "dream" of studying in the west and benefiting from the more plentiful technology and resources. Zhao (1996) ascribed Chinese students' desire to study overseas to their need to guarantee some protection from uncertain future events at home. He emphasized the zeal with which they went about their preparations, especially attempting to obtain high TOEFL scores. These students seemed to fit that description. All wanted to stay after graduation for at least one year, and most hoped that graduate study was a route to employment and immigration.

The Mathematics Student Role

Faculty Perspectives

Without exception, Chinese students were highly regarded as superior mathematicians. Their excellence in mathematics ensured that the departmental debate about the admission of foreign students had resulted in a request for special intensive English programs, initiated by faculty in administrative roles: "We can't afford to cut international students because they're the best. That's why I got involved with English, to try to do something. Going American means lowering the standards."

In their role as mathematics students, the ITAs' language was considered a minor problem "initially." Professors whose interest in the ITAs was as students of mathematics believed strongly that mathematics was the only priority for the students, and that they should be required to focus on nothing else for the first two years as they prepared for their doctoral preliminary exams. Unfortunately, since the students were balancing the dual roles of student and ITA, such strong views led these faculty to advise their students not to take ESL courses.

When the students heeded the advice, as they were bound to, they were perceived by other faculty as uncooperative in spite of their mathematical prowess.

Student Perspectives

The students' perspectives on their role as mathematics graduate students were quite different to those of the faculty. All described the intense pressure they felt in keeping up with their course work and, contrary to the faculty beliefs, revealed difficulties with unfamiliar course content, as in the following typical comment, "Each quarter there is about one major course is very difficult for me. The information is totally new, and textbook is very thick, and the professor drives us very fast and at that time I feel painful [sic]".

Students also had problems understanding the oral English of their professors, especially those who were non-native speakers of English. Thus they needed to rely heavily on the visual medium. They focused most of their attention on keeping up with the fast pace of the class lectures. There was little opportunity for interaction among the Chinese and American students and the professor because of the hectic pace:

> . . . . the teacher goes very quick and I have to keep take notes. Really the other students including the American students don't ask any questions. They like me, just listen and don't ask any questions and after the course is done all the students go to another courses [sic] to continue their courses .

The model of education they were experiencing was a traditional "chalk and talk" approach. Both the faculty and students reported, and classroom observations confirmed, that the students were fairly passive listeners and note takers in class. Occasionally the professor would throw out a question, which was rarely answered, but most of the time they lectured very quickly and covered the board with mathematics. Sometimes an American student would call out a question, but generally the students were quiet.

It is likely that the Chinese students' culturally determined strategy for dealing with difficult or partially comprehended material contributed to the faculty belief that they found the

mathematics courses easy. The ITAs said that they followed the Chinese practice of attempting to think about problems on their own before asking the professor. They believed that students gave a better impression of themselves if they were able to comprehend the material without having to question the professor and thus risk hinting that the lecture had been less than clear. If they could not understand after they had thought long and hard about a problem, they would ask other students. The American tradition of Office Hours as a time to approach the professor with problems and queries was one that they were reluctant to take advantage of, partly because of their limited language skills, but also because they did not want to expose their lack of understanding, or suggest that the instructor had not been clear. Thus, their reliance on Chinese cultural norms encouraged the faculty to believe that no difficulties existed when in fact the students were experiencing problems which caused them to devote a great deal of time to their studies.

The ITA role

Faculty Perspectives

Although the mathematics student role was not perceived as a problem by the faculty, dissatisfaction with the ITA role was the catalyst that precipitated departmental action. The department offered a large number of service courses for non-majors and needed TAs to teach courses or to hold problems sessions and office hours. ITAs who failed the oral proficiency test could only be given grading assignments because they were not allowed contact with undergraduates.

The faculty reported that this problem caused resentment on the part of some faculty and American students. The view of the problem was expressed thus by an ex-department head:

> It causes irritation because TAs in the classroom have a much heavier workload than graders. American students are put in the classroom straight away but their math skills are weaker so they're struggling with their own math classes, while the Chinese have lighter TA loads and no problems with their own courses.

This view, as we have seen, was not endorsed by the ITAs. Several faculty also referred to a persistent rumor that the ITAs failed the test deliberately so that they would not have to teach. Most, however, attributed this as a face-saving move on the part of the students.

Differing interpretations of the ITA role created a contentious climate among the faculty. The ambivalence was stated by a research oriented professor who was also responsible for assigning TA duties:

> The problem is the faculty aren't clear about what they want. Do they want good math students to do math with, or weaker students to do the other things, teaching things? The fact is they [Chinese students] are fun to do math with.

ITAs placed in classroom instruction were generally perceived as unsuccessful by most faculty. Their language skills were regarded as weak, and culturally different behavior had "turned off students" because they did not conform to undergraduates expectations. Mathematics research-oriented faculty blamed the department and the undergraduates for the problem. These faculty agreed that their oral English proficiency was too weak for teaching initially, but felt that the best way to solve the problem was to allow them to practice their teaching immediately. These faculty claimed that the department "always listens to the undergraduate students and the TAs get punished."

The punishment these faculty referred to was the department's decision to effect policies to force the students to improve their English. Students who did not pass the Oral Proficiency Test during their first academic year lost $1000 of their stipend at the beginning of the following year. They had instituted a mathematics teaching test which all ITAs took after they had passed the Oral English Proficiency Test. They had required the students to attend two intensive English courses. All of these measures were referred to in terms that suggested the strength of the faculty frustration: "Suggestions about having cultural events are not viable. They're not compulsory. We can take attendance at intensive English courses. We can put them on notice. We can treat them like children."

The ITAs could not be assigned duties that put them in contact with undergraduates, but they were also perceived as failing as graders because they were "unwilling to cooperate." The faculty believed that grading was a much easier assignment than classroom teaching, and some expressed the opinion that students who failed the oral test should be given "heavy duty grading." The standard grading assignment was two courses per quarter, usually one of which was a graduate level course.

Perceptions of the ITAs' lack of cooperation arose because the students employed the same coping strategy of silence with the faculty and reliance on their friends for help and clarification of instructions. Hence, because the ITAs would not admit that they did not understand directions they often appeared to be ignoring oral instructions. The faculty were most irritated by the ITAs assigned to grade for upper level courses. They were required to annotate papers but did not do it satisfactorily. The faculty interpreted this behavior as a strategy to avoid the assignment by lack of cooperation.

Student Perspectives

All of the ITAs interviewed had grading assignments, except for two who had passed the test and were teaching introductory courses. All reported that grading for upper level courses was a very difficult assignment. The following represents a typical comment about the nature of the problems:

> Teacher gives a lot of homework. They are proofs and some are short
> and some can be several pages and their handwriting is not easy and
> I have to spend a lot of time to ask "what is this? What does he mean?"
> And after that I have to correct their mistakes and it will take a lot of
> time and I have 120 students.

The students claimed that they tried hard to indicate where the mistakes were located and why they occurred. For some students the difficulty was compounded by the fact that they themselves were not familiar with the course content: "In China I didn't learn the material so I have to learn it first by myself. It's not hard for me but I must spend time on it."

Thus, lack of prior knowledge about course content, unfamiliarity with handwriting, sloppy layout of the undergraduates' work, and the volume of grading, meant that they were sometimes late, and sometimes unable to complete the assignment to the satisfaction of the faculty. But their professors were unaware of these very serious obstacles to efficient performance of the task. The ITAs' silence, which they believed demonstrated their own willingness to cooperate and to present themselves as intelligent, hardworking students, had exactly the opposite effect and helped to exacerbate the negative attributions.

Two ITAs who taught introductory calculus courses said that they went into the classroom before they knew anything about undergraduate education in the U.S.A. They expected, for example, that all the students would have read the book before coming to class so that they would have prior knowledge of the topic. Nevertheless, classroom observation of these two ITAs showed that they were consciously trying to use interactive teaching methods that they had practiced in the intensive English program. As a result, they were becoming more comfortable in the classroom, and were pleased with the easier relationships with the undergraduate students that resulted.

Motivation to Improve Language Ability

Faculty Perspectives

The faculty stated that they did not believe that the Chinese ITAs were motivated to improve their language ability. This was incomprehensible to them because they also knew that the students wanted to seek employment that would enable them to remain in the U.S.A. They knew also from past experience that most of the students did not find jobs in a poor job market because of their limited oral English skills.

The data showed that the more the faculty interacted with the students in their ITA role, the higher their frustration with what they perceived as lack of cooperation, and the more they expressed negative attributions. For example, the professor of the Teaching Seminar reported that the ITAs were unable to comprehend articles from journals on mathematics education, or summarize the contents orally in the seminar.

The faculty attributed poor language skills to lack of motivation to give the time and effort necessary to improve. Typical statements were "they refuse to speak English," and "the attitude of the students is wrong. They are not motivated to work on English." Several talked about the problem in the TA office where Chinese was the only language heard most of the time. One professor said he had asked the students to agree to speak only English in the TA room but the students had refused, a clear violation of the status norms between faculty and students. The mathematics educators on the faculty said that they had several times suggested strategies for seeking out English conversation, such as offering help to American students, but "they never follow up on any suggestions to improve their English," Several faculty members believed that the students shifted the blame for their lack of English progress to the oral proficiency test, believing they had been wrongly evaluated.

Student Perspectives

The students depended entirely on their assistantship stipend for financial support, and were extremely nervous that they might lose it because of their inadequate oral proficiency skills. Thus, the department policies to encourage a strong focus on English had a mixed effect on the students. Rather than embracing every opportunity to use English communicatively, they focused much attention on test-taking strategies, such as trying to memorize test questions. As one student said, " I was very willing to take the English course. I want to improve. But then the department say if we fail the course we lose our assistantship. That makes us too afraid."

All had taken intensive TOEFL preparation courses in China lasting between six months and one year and were proud of their very high scores. As a result, they believed that they were proficient in grammar, reading and writing. When asked to evaluate their proficiency in writing papers and in reading newspapers, the students replied that they had no problem because they had received high scores on the TOEFL reading comprehension section and the Test of Written English. On the other hand, they all knew that their oral English skills were poor because they had never been exposed to spoken English before coming to the U.S.A. One student expressed

surprise at learning in an ESL course that stress and intonation patterns were so important to comprehensibility.

It was clear from the students' comments about their language skills that for the most part, they approached the acquisition of communicative competence as they had done throughout their lives: as a subject to be mastered by learning the skills to pass a test. A constant refrain heard by the ESL faculty was "give us more opportunities to speak English." They also did not believe that some of the academic reading and writing tasks they were being asked to perform could not be successfully completed using strategies learned for passing standardized multiple choice language tests such as the TOEFL.

Nevertheless, the ITAs claimed that they were eager to speak English and to interact with Americans. However, they were all inhibited to an extent that curbed their desire to seek out opportunities for interaction. They thought they sensed impatience on the part of their listeners. Most found normal conversational English too fast paced to follow, and they did not understand slang and idiomatic usage. A major barrier to communication with American students in the TA room is illustrated by the following comment:

> Yesterday I spoke with one American then another American joined us. Five or ten minutes later I found I cannot speak again. They spoke very quickly. They were talking about his daughter's education and I found I had big trouble to follow them. If the conversation is math I can follow them.

Although they professed to be eager for social contact with Americans, they claimed that communication apprehension prevented them because of their limited command of idiomatic English and their lack of linguapragmatic competence for everyday conversation. They said they could not follow up on the specific language improvement suggestions made by the faculty because the ideas involved time, and, as one student put it, "my courses are really very tight and every day I keep working and working." Thus, in spite of their stated desire for interaction, their

apprehension and lack of time prevented them from engaging in social contact, and as a result, their language progress was slow.

Motivation to Acculturate.

Faculty Perspectives

This category produced the most negative comments and revealed the extent of the culture gap and negative attributions. The opinion of all the professors, except for one, was that "culture was the main problem." The following comments about the Chinese students are representative of the opinions of the faculty: "[the students] isolate themselves in the Chinese community." "They're a close knit bunch," "They congregate together too much." "They exclude Americans," and "they're not connected to the culture around them." The faculty referred to the paradox that while the students routinely switched their majors from less to more employable branches of mathematics, they did not seem to associate competence in the culture and language with employability.

Lack of progress in oral English proficiency was attributed to the Chinese ITAs' cultural isolation. One ITA in the group stood out as being different because she made an effort to become part of the culture by going to parties and other social events. Because her English was considered good, she was pointed out as the exception proving the rule. The faculty also realized that they themselves were remiss in not engaging in social events with the ITAs. They lamented that increasing work loads had drastically curtailed the amount of departmental socializing.

Student Perspectives

Interviews with the ITAs revealed that the Chinese did indeed live together in apartment buildings that they themselves referred to as the "Chinese ghetto." Many of them were married to spouses who spoke little or no English. Most of the married students had, or were expecting, a child, so living together in this way provided their spouses with company. They all rejected the notion that they were unwilling to acculturate, citing their communication apprehension and the heavy pressures of their course work and TA assignments as keeping them from social interactions.

To probe the extent to which the ITAs embraced the group orientation perceived by the faculty, they were asked to comment on the notion that China was a culture with a collective orientation. They called that view a "myth," citing Japan as such a culture because "they care what the group thinks and does and do everything as a group especially when they're overseas."

Nevertheless, the students' descriptions of their lives revealed that they operated under a system of interdependence and group obligations which sometimes seemed to add stress to their coping strategies. For example, newly arriving students were helped by "old" students, who were glad to help them settle in. However, sometimes the demands seemed excessive by American standards, especially for students who owned cars. Several ITAs talked about car owners who were expected to drive people around at their convenience, in one case, before the driver had passed his driving test. If they protested, "they would say bad things about him and treat him badly." Another student described a situation in the apartment building where "one kid started piano lessons and the parents bought a piano. Now there are pianos all around us." They also described cases where they had helped students who had lost their assistantship because they had not been able to pass the oral proficiency test after two years. These students had taken jobs off-campus and did not have enough time to do their homework. Friends supported them by letting them copy their homework so that they would not fail.

Although the students denied that they acted as a group, or adhered to a collective orientation, many of their anecdotes revealed that they found their source of strength in their reliance on the group and their expectations for mutual support. When asked to describe their social life, all students indicated that what little there was centered around activities planned by the Chinese Students' Organization, or other groups of Chinese friends.

Discussion

The study found little congruence between the perceptions of the student actors and faculty observers about each other. Most faculty attributions were negative, as predicted by Kanouse and Hanson (1972), in all behavioral spheres not strictly limited to mathematics itself. Attributions were also made in the direction indicated by Jones and Nisbett's (1972) distinction

between actor and observer attributions. The faculty observers saw that the ITAs lived and interacted mainly with each other and ignored suggestions to work on English. The faculty attributed this behavior to the ITAs' personal dispositions (lack of motivation, isolationism, and unwillingness to cooperate). The student actors were unaware that the faculty attributed such negative causes to their behavior. They described their own behavior as the result of stressful situational pressures (academic course load, lack of time, demanding grading assignments, little access to English conversation).

The reported interactions in this study also provide support for Gumperz' (1982; 1992) theory of conversational inference. The faculty formed their views of the students' intentions during their interactions as they interpreted the linguapragmatic contextualization cues. The ITAs made frequent reference to appropriate politeness strategies in their own culture, and these were the behaviors they used most frequently with the faculty.

The ITAs' polite deference and concern for maintaining appropriate face for unequal status interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Clancy et al. 1996; Scollon, 1985; Scollon & Scollon, 1983) manifested itself through the use of silence and avoidance in formal contacts with the faculty both in and out of the classroom. They followed the Chinese cultural and linguistic practice (Hu & Grove, 1991; Kim et al, 1996; Pratt, 1991) of avoiding speaking up in a way that might cause the professor to think negatively of their ability. Their backchannel behavior in conversations was also dominated by silence. It is ironic that these very strategies, which the ITAs' believed demonstrated their sincerity and seriousness as students contributed strongly to the negative attributions made by the faculty.

The majority of the students, in contrast to the faculty beliefs, seemed to recognize the importance of communication skills to their ultimate success. What they felt they could not control was the means to access the opportunities. All the students suffered from communication apprehension, a term first used to describe reticent individuals. McCroskey (1977) defined it as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p.78). The students in this study all reported their shyness or

fear at conversing with Americans and were extremely sensitive to perceived insults or impatience on the part of their listeners. They welcomed their ESL class as a place to practice their English without fear, but recognized, as did the students in Zimmerman's 1995) study, that they needed intensive and frequent contact with American students to facilitate their acquisition of colloquial English and cultural adaptation. However, it is also clear that the ITAs had come to depend too much on their ESL instructors to provide them with American conversation partners. They were passive, almost helpless, in their attitude to making contact with Americans. They also relied heavily on their compatriots for information, rather than approaching knowledgeable native speakers, as Zimmerman (1995) also found. As Blum-Kulka (1991 and Hinkel (1996 found, it is also possible that they may not have wished to conform to N. American conversational and pragmatic norms because they did not accept them, wished to maintain their first language independence, or were narrowly focused on their academic goals.

Certainly, the ITAs had all chosen to live in the Chinese enclave, and reported that most of their social interactions took place there. It seems clear that their sojourn in a foreign culture had brought their culture-level collectivism (Hu & Grove, 1991; Triandis, 1988) to the fore, and given them the sense of group cohesion and security they needed. But this life did not give them the access they needed to oral English so that they could begin to acquire the necessary linguapragmatic competence that would allow them to avoid miscommunications. As previous studies have shown, it may be more difficult for students from interdependent cultures to accept North American norms (Jin & Cortazzi, 1993; Liu, 1995; Tyler, 1995; Tyler & Davies, 1990).

From their descriptions of their life in the department and in their homes, however, it is impossible to attribute only collective motivations to the students' actions. Garrot's (1995) discovery that both collective and individualistic orientations were both present in the group, perhaps varying by age or gender, is probably a more accurate interpretation. Certainly, the students' description of the parents' rush to buy a piano for their children sounds more like an American "keeping up with the Jones'" competitive, individualistic orientation.

Finally, the academic system had clearly not succeeded in giving the ITAs an unequivocal message regarding the amount of time they should spend on their communication skills. The advisor was considered all-powerful by the students, and some of them felt they had openly defied their advisor in opting to take ESL courses. As Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990, 1993) demonstrated, advisors do not take kindly to such violations of academic status norms.

Implications for ITA Training

Findings of this study have interesting implications for ITA training. It is likely that some of these findings will be difficult to implement because this study has revealed the major role played by department faculty in the students' language acquisition and acculturation. In most academic institutions, ESL faculty have few opportunities to influence decisions made at the department level. However, it is clear that the first goal must be to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990; Gudykunst & Kim, 1992) felt by the ITAs about their roles in the academy.

ITA training courses have hitherto concentrated on explicating the culture of American classroom from the undergraduate perspective only. It seems clear that such courses should also focus on the expectations of the ITAs' academic professors. By making known to the ITAs the inferences and attributions that may be made by professors about the students' silence and avoidance, the students can be made aware of the cultural expectation that they speak up about what they can and cannot do. Simulations and role-plays about faculty-graduate student interactions that teach appropriate linguapragmatic behavior will have much salience for the ITAs, so that they will more easily see the value of incorporating such behaviors into their own communication styles and classroom teaching behavior.

What can ESL faculty and ITA trainers do to influence the faculty in the ITAs' graduate major to understand the communication styles of their ITAs? This study has shown that there are usually several faculty members in a department who regard communicative competence and acculturation as urgent issues for the good of the department and the students. We can take

advantage of collaborative programs such as intensive English courses to make allies among sympathetic faculty. Then we can point out the cultural and conversational constraints that cause the faculty to make negative attributions, and we can suggest ways of determining what exactly their students mean when they do not respond like 'typical' Americans. We can point out alternative explanations for conversational strategies such as silence. We can point out the disadvantages for all concerned when a department limits itself to one language group, and encourage them to strive for a more diverse student body. Above all, we can point out that all students arriving in a new culture need to be given the time to devote to language study and cultural adaptation, and that to overwhelm them with course work and ITA assignments in their first semester is probably counter productive. Perhaps new opportunities for collaboration in the training of ITAs will arise to the benefit of all concerned. As our campuses become increasingly international in both faculty and students, we need to be aware of the culturally based behaviors and perceptions that may, as in the present case, contribute to faulty attributions about person and situation.

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